

Lexington Herald-Leader

Official: State might have to curtail cold medicine further due to meth labs

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By Dori Hjalmarson

LONDON — One Kentucky drug enforcement official said the state should further restrict the availability of the cold medicine pseudoephedrine in order to curb a new spike in methamphetamine activity.

Stopping the networks of people who buy pseudoephedrine and resell it to meth manufacturers will require making the cold medicine a Schedule IV controlled substance, available only by prescription, or banning it altogether, said Dave Keller, who heads the Kentucky portion of the Appalachia High-Intensity Drug Trafficking Area.

"In my opinion, that's the next step we're going to have to do," Keller said.

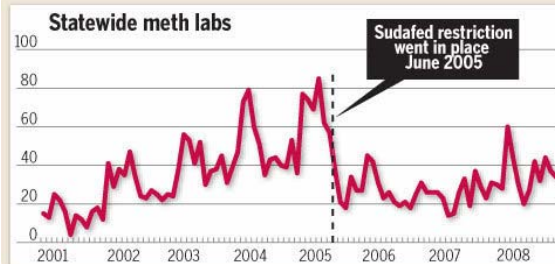
Prescription laws have worked in states facing similar trends, such as Oregon and Oklahoma, he said.

Meth is made by using a variety of other chemicals to distill pseudoephedrine into a highly addictive drug. Pseudoephedrine is a decongestant used in some common cold medicines, including some formulations of Sudafed.

Other meth ingredients, such as battery acid and anhydrous ammonia, are readily available at pharmacies and feed stores, too, but they have common substitutes in meth recipes. Pseudoephedrine is the only must-have ingredient, so it's the target of the most restrictions.

Meth labs in Kentucky

Federal and state drug enforcement officials see a new increase in the number of meth labs, since manufacturers are finding ways around restrictions placed on the purchase of the main ingredient, the cold medicine pseudoephedrine.



Source: Kentucky State Police

CAMILLE WEBER | cweber1@herald-leader.com

After a peak 600 meth labs were busted in Kentucky in 2004, the state moved pseudoephedrine behind pharmacy counters and required identification and a signature for purchase. That produced a dramatic decrease in the number of meth labs statewide, federal officials said at a news conference Wednesday in London, but since then, meth manufacturers have developed networks of middlemen whose only role in making meth might be buying the cold medicine.

This year, 210 labs had been busted by May, and the state is on track to reach or surpass the 2004 peak, said U.S. District Attorney James Zerhusen.

There is no statewide effort yet to further curb pseudoephedrine sales, said Van Ingram, executive director for the Kentucky Office of Drug Control Policy, in a phone interview from Frankfort.

"I kind of feel like if Kentucky does, and the seven other surrounding states don't, it won't be effective," Ingram said.

Indiana's lag behind Kentucky in tracking pseudoephedrine sales helped make the Louisville area a "smurfer's paradise," Keller said. "Smurfing" is jargon for buying pseudoephedrine and reselling it for meth manufacture.

Not only are more meth labs being found, but also larger cohorts of people have a part in meth making. More people are being charged with conspiracy to make meth, since the smurfers can be charged with felonies as severe as charges for the manufacturer and seller, said Kyle Edelen, public information officer for the U.S. Attorney's office.

A recent case that resulted in a life sentence for a meth manufacturer came about partly because his network of pseudoephedrine buyers were able to testify against him, Zerhusen said.

"We want people to act on their suspicions" and report possible meth activity, Edelen said.